DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 726 UD 019 665

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TITLE The Korean Church as an Agency for the Assimilation of Koreans in the United States.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies (31st, Los Angeles, California, March 30-April 1, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; *Church Role; Civil Rights; *Ethnicity; Immigrants; *Korean Americans; *Religious Factors; *Social Integration
IDENTIFIERS California (Los Angeles); California (San Francisco)

ABSTRACT

This study is based on the hypothesis that a functional relationship exists between the emergence of Korean Christian churches in America and an increasing number of Korean immigrants to the United States. The categories investigated include: (1) demographic characteristics of church membership; (2) the purely religious role of the churches; (3) the assimilative functions of the churches; (4) the relationship between clergy and laity; and (5) ethnicity as it relates to the churches. Data collected seem to support the theory and concepts presented in related literature that religion does function for the integration and survival of people in a society. In this case, Korean churches in America function as agents of religious and social assimilation, reinforce Korean ethnic identity and solidarity, and are gradually becoming a center of civil rights activities for Korean Americans. In conclusion, although Korean churches in America suffer from many problems including the lack of religious faith among members, financial difficulty, and intra-church conflict between clergy and laity, their emergence and functions are directly related to the multidimensional needs of Koreans as a minority in this country. (Author/FB)

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JUL 17 1979

THE KOREAN CHURCH AS AN AGENCY FOR THE ASSIMILATION OF KOREANS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Prepared for presentation at the Thirty-first Annual Meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, Los Angeles, March 30 - April 1, 1979.

UD019665

The history of Korean immigration to the United States began in 1901 when the first Korean immigrants arrived in Hawaii (Kim and Patterson, 1974:2). Since then, many Koreans have emigrated to the United States, and today the estimated total number of immigrants exceed 200,000 (Shin, 1977:12).

The entrance of Korean immigrants to the U.S. was spurred by both the end of World War II and the Korean conflict, and the influx of this group has been increasing steadily ever since that time.

Upon arrival in the New World, Korean immigrants, like many other immigrants, have gone and are going through the experience of hardship because of communication problems, sociocultural adjustment problems, and alienation from the mainstream of American society.

In an attempt to overcome such difficulties and to survive in a new environment, Korean immigrants began to organize themselves as an independent ethnic group by developing such groups as the Korean Association, the Alumni Club, the Korean Church, and various other forms of informal groups based on particular interests and occupations. These organizations emerged as significant social groups and institutions in Korean American communities where a substantial number of Koreans resided (Lee, 1975: 18-21).

According to Kim and Patterson (1974:v), the first Korean church in America was established on July 4, 1903, on the Island of Oahu in Hawaii. As of March, 1975, there were 293 Korean churches throughout the United States (Shin, 1977:vii), and it is to be expected that the number of Korean churches will grow as the number of Korean immigrants increases.[1]

This study is based on the hypothesis that a functional relationship

will exist between emergence of Korean Christian churches and an increasing number of Korean immigrants to the United States. This author would assert that the Korean immigrants as a minority group and the formation of their churches occurred as a response to the assimilation problems experienced by them. Therefore, this study is not theological but socio-anthropological.

This paper attempts to investigate the following categories: (1) demographic characteristics of the church membership, (2) the purely religious role of the churches, (3) the assimilative functions of the churches, (4) the relationship between clergy and laity, and (5) ethnicity as it relates to the churches.

The data regarding the above analyses were collected through two approaches: (1) personal and telephone interviews with the Korean ministers in the southeast and west coast (Los Angeles and San Francisco areas), and (2) a survey questionnaire sent to the church membership in the same areas.[2]

The studies that describe the Korean Church in America are limited. Shin (1977) discussed primarily the problems of Korean churches together with a brief review of history and functions of Korean churches in America. Kim (1975) also presented the problems of Korean churches in Chicago area. These studies are by and large theological and exploratory. Kim (1977: 47-63) discussed the history and the role of Korean churches and Lee (1975:18-21; 1977) briefly discussed the evolution and function of the Korean Christian churches in America.

The following literature related to minority status and the church was reviewed. Smith (1966) presented an historical account of European immigrant churches in America, including their distinctive characteristics

as facilitators of inter-ethnic membership and as vehicles for meeting the social needs of the immigrants in early period. Wilson (1978:366-391) discussed religion as an agent of social reform and change for minority groups. Marx (1973), Nelson (1975), and Simpson and Yinger (1972:517-545) analyzed the role of the Black churches in America as a source of the recent civil rights movement. Glock (1973) argued that deprivation--social, psychological, economic, and ethical--was the source of religious evolution. Young (1937) asserted that the religion of the minority might serve as a means of dealing with their inferior status and coping with discrimination. Kashima (1977) discussed the evolution and ethnic functions of Buddhist churches in Japanese American communities.

The above works appear to support the theory that, either in primitive or complex society, religion does function for the integration and survival of the people (Durkheim, 1912; Malinowski, 1925, 1944; Wallace, 1966).

Data collected for this study seem to support the aforementioned concepts and theory. Obviously, Korean churches in America do function as an agent of religious and social assimilation for the membership. For example, approximately 40% of the respondents, including male and female, did not attend Christian churches when they were in Korea. Although not every church member held a belief in God, many appeared to have changed th their religious values since they arrived in America.[3] It appears that church attendance alone may change values.

As to the question for the reasons for attending churches in America, 81% of the respondents thought worship of God was the major reason for attending and the rest gave such reasons as fellowship with other Koreans, problem solving, guidance for children, and as a favor owed to the clergy. In addition, 48% of the respondents indicated that becoming a Christian in

America would be beneficial because the majority religion in America was Christians.[4] This finding would coincide with Glock's (1973:214) argument that the socially deprived tend to adopt the institutions of larger society.

The social functions of Korean churches in America are mainly related to assimilation problems of the Korean immigrants and their social isolation from their kin and friends in Korea. The following findings regarding Korean churches in America seem to support this functional thesis concerning minority status and church attendance presented by Wilson (1978), Marx (1973), Nelson (1975), Glock (1973), Kashima (1977), Young (1937), and Simpson and Yinger (1972).

Those who attend church tend to be the most recent immigrants to the United States. Seventy percent (70%) of those who have been in America less than five years attend. Most of male respondents were engaged in blue collar jobs such as mechanic, weaver, etc., and only one-third of the female respondents were working outside the home as employees of manufacturing enterprises. Approximately 82% of male church membership belonged to those in their 30's and 40's, and 95% of the female membership belonged to the 20's and 30's age group.

The educational attainment of the church members was diverse. However, most had finished high school and college.[5] The mean monthly income of male membership was approximately $1370.00 and that of female members was about $760.00.

Korean church membership is not necessarily based on religious faith. Approximately 30% of the total respondents expressed that they did not believe in God. (This response seemed to contradict with the proportion (81%) of the members who claimed worship of God as their main reason for going to church.) At any rate, it is asserted that the members who did

not believe in God must have other reasons for attending church. The following responses to the question regarding the need of the Korean Church may reveal the reasons for their attending. They are listed in order of priority.

1. To solve the problems Korean confront in America 24%
2. Communication problems in English (unable to understand church service in English) 19%
3. For the fellowship of Koreans (loneliness) 17%
4. Evangelism of Christianity 10%
5. Ethnic identity 8%
6. Other reasons 4%
7. No response 18%

The above findings clearly show that the church members expect social services from either the clergy or from other church members. At the same time, the data also show that many church members confront living difficulties in America, and that they need some place where their anxieties, which stem from this adjustment stress, can be relieved.[6] Most members seemed to cope with the hardships they experience as a minority through church attendance (Young, 1937; Simpson and Yinger, 1972). Furthermore, the loneliness of Korean immigrants seemed to be enormous and it will take quite a while to overcome such feelings of social isolation.

The relationship between clergy and laity seemed to a certain degree to be conflicting. This conflict may stem from a number of sources: (1) differences in religious faith, (2) financial problems of the minister, (3) qualification of the clergy, (4) gossip, and (5) infighting among factions of the membership. These sources were mentioned by the respondents as major problems of Korean churches in America today.

It seems that conflict in expectations between clergy and laity does

exist. For instance, the members would actually expect services from the minister to solve their problems. On the other hand, the minister may not be able to look after every member and in addition, he might emphasize religious faith prior to rendering services. Furthermore, many Korean ministers were engaged in part-time ministry (70%). This makes it difficult for Korean ministers to fully meet the needs of every member. Some respondents expressed displeasure about being pressured to donate money to the church by the minister. Therefore, the financial problem of the church and the minister seem to be a source of conflict between clergy and laity.

The personal problems of the minister may also lead to the question of his qualifications. Accumulated disrespect could cause conflict between the clergy and his membership. In some cases, the minister becomes a subject and a vehicle of gossip which eventually becomes a source of conflict and division among membership and between minister and his congregation.[7] The conflict between clergy and laity appears to be accelerated by the disadvantageous conditions of both minister and congregation, and it might contribute to the establishment of new churches.

Finally, the Korean Church in America has an ethnic function. Korean ethnic identity and solidarity is strongly reinforced by the church. Many Korean churches not only teach Korean language to the second generation of Koreans but also give a financial support to Korean Americans who are in difficulty, Korean churches in Korea, and also send donations to the people in Korea who need help because of disaster, etc.

The ethnic unity is further strengthened by special sermons on the dates of Korean national events such as Liberation Day (August 15th), Independence Movement Day (March 1st), etc. From time to time, special programs are sponsored by the churches to show Korean films, to give a

lecture on Korean history to the young Koreans, etc.

The Korean Church in America is beginning to function as a center of civil rights for Korean Americans. It appears that the Korean Church here is willing to support the Koreans who are involved in litigation and to protect civil rights and welfare of Korean Americans.[8]

In conclusion, although Korean churches in America suffer from many problems including the lack of religious faith of their members, some financial difficulty, and intra church conflict between clergy and laity, their emergence and functions are directly related to the multi-dimensional needs of Koreans as a minority in this country. The findings in this study support the theory that religious institutions have evolved and function to satisfy the needs and survival of the people (Durkheim, 1912; Malinowski, 1925, 1944; Wallace, 1966). The pressures on Korean Americans are numerous; including social, psychological, religious, and ethnic ones. Adjusting to these pressures constitutes the critical problem related to the survival of Koreans in America.

The political role of the Korean churches in America is embryonic (except for the independence movement of Korea during the period of the Japanese administration). However, the Korean churches are gradually becoming a center of the civil rights movement and ethnic politics in America.

Historically, the functions of the Korean churches in America seemed to have shifted from the independence movement against Japanese administration of Korea prior to the end of the World War II to religious assimilation and problem-solving today's complex world. However, it should be pointed out, social services rendered by the churches to the membership seem to decline as the churches grow in size.[9]

The future of the Korean churches in America in terms of size, function, and survival is unknown. It may be determined by the number of new Korean immigrants who find these shores, and whether or not their needs are similar to those who preceded them to this country. If the newcomers' needs are indeed like the ones of those who arrived earlier, then the church has a future of continued growth. This author has a particular interest in the membership of the churches and reaction of second and third generation of Koreans to the church as time goes by.[10]

Notes

1. A recent issue of the Hankook Ilbo (Korea Times) lists more than 200 Korean churches only in the Los Angeles and San Francisco areas. Therefore, the number of Korean churches in America would probably far exceed 300 today.

2. Fifteen ministers were interviewed with a stratified sampling based on the size of membership. Eighty-three questionnaires were returned from ten churches out of approximately five hundred sent.

3. Approximately 10% of the respondents was Buddhist, 5% being Confucians, and 25% atheists.

4. Simpson and Yinger (1972) concluded that the Japanese in Hawaii who have become Protestants, by and large, have climbed the social ladder more rapidly than those who have remained Buddhist.

5. High school graduates - 23%. Junior College graduates - 12.5%. Senior College graduates - 31%.

6. Communication problems in English, loneliness, employment, cultural differences, racial discrimination, hard work, and education of children are frequently mentioned as the most serious problems Koreans confront in America.

7. The Hankook Ilbo Mikook Soshik (February 1, 1979) reported three court cases of Korean churches. The article discussed the source of conflict because of the increasing number of Korean churches and the problems resulting from heterogeneity in religious faith.

8. The Hankook Ilbo Mikook Soshik frequently reported that Korean churches gave and were campaigning for funds to defray the legal fees of the Koreans who were charged with crimes which were considered to be of a racial nature. In addition, the demonstration by the Koreans against a newspaper in Seattle seemed to be organized by the Korean Association and the Korean churches in the area.

9. The ministers of the four largest churches in Los Angeles indicated that the churches are no longer able to help the membership solve their problems. They expressed that many of these services could be received from other agencies such as the Korean Association, community service centers, etc. They rather seem to emphasize ethnicity, religious faith, and the guidance of the young Koreans.

10. Kashima (1977) reported that the second and third generation of Japanese Americans were actively involved in the Buddhist church. This author's assumption is that if second and third generation Koreans are not able to understand the Korean language fully, they will be alienated from the church, if its services are rendered in a language they do not understand.

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